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CUTTING THE CONGESTION

THE FOLLOWING IS A PRECIS OF A LITRA DISCUSSION DOCUMENT PUBLISHED LAST YEAR. THE ORIGINAL TRANSLATION WAS DONE BY BILL VENTON AND THE EDITOR DID THE REST. THANKS TO BILL FOR HIS HARD WORK

The Gotthard is congested, it is going to get worse, and there will be knock on effects all over Switzerland. In 2000 one million lorries crossed the Swiss Alps and by 2010 this is projected to increase to 2million. The Government wants and indeed have a constitutional commitment to place more than 2/3 of this traffic on rail.

There is a dilemma (isn't there always?) The Government has to operate within the EU Traffic Levy Agreement and thus is currently restricted to protecting the environment using general measures on noise, safety and general order. The current Gotthard quota and any potential increase in it has, in turn, implications for traffic originating in and bound for Ticino and Central Switzerland whose lorry movements actually form part of the quota.

Although road crossings are already congested freight cannot be forced onto rail. The long-term solution is seen as a combination of the Rolling Road priced at a level below that of the levy and the encouragement of unaccompanied freight. The dilemma here is that the Gotthard, in particular, has an inadequate loading gauge to deal with the current 4m high vehicles.

In the short term, however, the following solutions are proposed:

- Diverting some of the A2 Basel-Milano (Gotthard Road Traffic) via the Valais passes.

- Ensuring this by allocation of road slots using electronic reservation

- Regulating local freight traffic without trailers by quota, longer opening of the Gotthard Road Pass (as opposed to the tunnel alternative) and better use of Cargo Domino.

So, in the longer term, the answer has to be the Rolling Road (ROLA) and more use of unaccompanied freight. Existing terminals and some new ones planned should ensure a total capacity of 600,000, and 900,000 after the Lötschberg Base Tunnel is completed. ROLA has to be perceived as good value in terms of quality and, most importantly, price. The price question is complicated by the levy; ROLA transit must be cheaper than the combined costs of the levy and the drive over the Alps. At the same time there must sufficient capacity. The government, and by implication SBB, are looking to pre-booking in order to fill the trains. It is not simply a question of running extra trains as line capacity is a constraint and the objective must to be achieve maximum utilisation without affecting passenger traffic.

With unaccompanied freight the main constraint here is the lack of suitable crossing places in Italy. Currently there is a maximum crossing length of 500m to Busto in Italy although the international train length norm is 750m. More use could also be made of the Luino line. These simple measures could increase capacity by 50% alone.

It is not possible to force freight onto unaccompanied services; there will always be operators who wish to drive over the Alps. Both methods have to be used and made as attractive as possible. Hupac are currently experimenting with wagons capable of conveying 4m high lorries, their use on the Lötschberg will also increase capacity by requiring less track switching. An order is about to be placed with Bombardier for the first production wagons. A new French system will also be able to transit the Alps but as this is a side loading design there are implications for terminals and the width between tracks. I believe Today's Railways recently carried an article on this recently.

The scene is set, therefore, for an increase in rail-freight traffic, which is driven by the Government and who have accepted their responsibility, on environmental grounds. Protection of the Alps is seen as a major priority.

STOP PRESS

Switzerland's new national airline, Swiss, has announced it is to form a new regional subsidiary to try to cut costs by 20 per cent. The company's latest strategy comes as Swiss fights for survival in a very difficult year for airlines. To be known as **Swiss Express**, the new airline will offer low-cost air connections, especially within Europe.